



# **Garfield Charter Township**

Grand Traverse County

Assessing Department  
Customer Service Policy

2022

## **What Does Customer Service Mean Here?**

In the Garfield Township Assessors Office, it means providing a quality service that satisfies the needs/wants of our taxpayers. Good customer services means continued success, higher job satisfaction, improved morale and better teamwork.

Customer Service = Accountability + Delivery

Customer Service is:

- Fundamental
- Simple
- Daily
- Time oriented
- Persevering
- Specific

"A lot of people have fancy things to say about customer service, including me. But it's just a day-in, day-out, ongoing, never ending, unremitting, persevering, compassionate type of activity."

- Leon Gorman, former President - LL Bean

## **Professional Qualities in Customer Service:**

Assessors who constantly deal with customers (inside and outside of the township) need to strive for certain qualities to help them answer taxpayer needs.

The professional qualities of customer service to be emphasized always relate to what the taxpayer wants. After years of market research, it turns out that taxpayers (and customers) are constantly internalizing their customer service experience. What this means is they are grading our customer service during each transaction - though we rarely know it. Six basic needs that stand out are:

1. Friendliness - the most basic and associated with courtesy and politeness.

2. Empathy - the taxpayer wants to know that we appreciate their wants and circumstances.
3. Fairness - the taxpayer wants to feel they receive adequate attention and reasonable answers.
4. Control - the taxpayer wants to feel that his/her wants and input has influence on the outcome.
5. Alternatives - most taxpayers want choice and flexibility from service. They want to know there are many avenues to satisfy them.
6. Information - taxpayers want to know what we know but in a pertinent and time-sensitive manner on a level that they understand. Too much information can put them off.

It is very important for township employees to know their jobs, and what it entails. Answering, "that's not my department" automatically demeans and demotes you in the mind of the taxpayer. Taxpayers want information, and they disrespect and distrust the person who is supposed to have information but doesn't.

On the other hand, answering "I don't know" is perfectly acceptable as long as you refer the taxpayer to where they can find the answer. Or better yet, you find the answer for them. Do NOT tell them you know something if you don't, this is the best way to lose taxpayer respect - especially if they find out later that your answer was wrong.

### **Good Information is Often Good Service:**

Township employees need to be empowered to satisfy taxpayers to the extent that they can. Employees will give bad service if they themselves receive bad service and little feedback from their managers, supervisors and co-workers.

**Remember:** external customer service starts with internal customer service.

### ***Some key statistical consumer sector data revealed***

- When customers receive good service they tell 10-12 people, on average.
- When customers receive poor service they tell upwards of 20 people.
- There is an 82% chance customers will repurchase from a company where they were satisfied.
- There is a 91% chance that poor service will dissuade a customer from every going back to a company.

While these statistics pertain to the retail world, they can be translated to our work within the township - simply exchange the word "customers" with "taxpayers":

- When taxpayers receive good service they tell 10-12 people, on average.
- When taxpayers receive poor service they tell upwards of 20 people.
- There is an 82% chance taxpayers will repurchase from a company where they were satisfied.
- There is a 91% chance that poor service will dissuade a taxpayer from every going back to a company.

### **Body Language:**

Body language often says more than words. A recent university study on how people receive information had these results:

- 55% of what we learn from others comes from their body language.
- 38% of what we learn from others comes from their tone of voice.
- 7% of what we learn from others comes from the words they say.

### ***Face-to-face Conversations***

It is often not what you articulate but how it is presented. What you wear and how you express yourself has a lot to do with how what you say is received.

As it turns out, substance is only part of the equation of being persuasive and influencing perception. This may seem unfair and superficial because what a

person says and how they behave *should be* more important than if they are well-groomed, smiling and dressed up. Yet, visual perception plays a vital role in human impressions and reactions. Nature and learned behavior has taught humans to perceive neat, smiling, well-presented individuals in a more commanding manner.

### ***Positive Non-verbal Communications***

Smiling - There is nothing like a smile and a pleasant face to greet a taxpayer - especially if he/she has a complaint. A smile and polite conversation can immediately disarm a disgruntled taxpayers. Facial expression sets a positive tone before you even begin speaking. A relaxed or pleasant facial expression is ideal most of the time.

Eye Contact - Always look into the taxpayer's eyes. Address them directly.

How You Look - Personal grooming has a big impact. Dirty hands, messy hair and poor dress can mean the loss of an otherwise happy taxpayer. When interacting with taxpayers, dress neatly and in a professional manner so as to command respect and to let the taxpayer know you take seriously your position.

Shaking Hands - When shaking hands with anyone, a firm and professional handshake is expected. This part of the greeting is now common among both men and women in a professional environment.

Be Attentive - When listening to a taxpayer, slightly lean towards your customer and nod your head occasionally to indicate you are listening.

Tone of Voice - Always convey friendliness and amicability. Do NOT raise your voice in frustration or anger - no matter how difficult or tiresome a taxpayer may behave.

Hand Gestures - Use hand movements to emphasize what you say (even on the phone) and to emphasize your feelings.

Personal Space - This is the distance that feels comfortable between you and another person. If another person approaches you and invades your

personal space, you automatically move back without thought - you are uncomfortable. Leave adequate distance between you and your customer. Adequate space is important to making customers feels secure and safe.

Posture - Slumping in a chair or leaning against a wall while interacting with a taxpayer are sure signs you are not interested in the taxpayer. Your post or posture should express attention, friendliness and openness. Lean forward, face them and nod to let them know you are interested.

Observation - Notice how the taxpayer behaves and what he/she reacts positively to while you are providing service.

**REMEMBER:** the little, interpersonal actions noted here mean a great deal in the area of customer relations. They can change perceptions and ultimately access the success of your customer relations efforts.

### ***Tone of Voice***

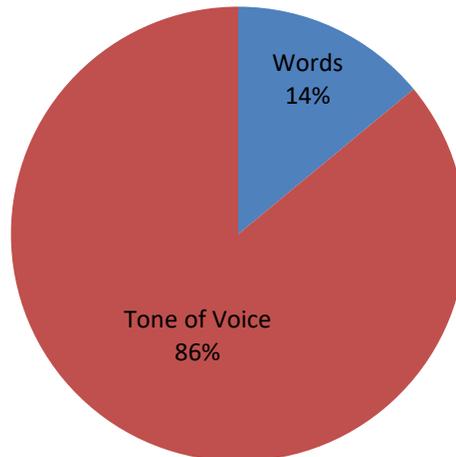
It's not what you say, it's how you say it.

The moment you pick up a phone, body language and visual perceptions disappear and your tone of voice becomes dominant. Almost the entire message you project to the taxpayer over the phone is derived from the tone of voice and attitude.

### Examples:

- A flat tone of voices says to the customer, "I don't like my job and would rather be elsewhere."
- Slow pitch and presentation say, "I am sad and lonely - do not bother me."
- A high pitch, rapid voice says, "I am enthusiastic and excited!"
- A loud voice says, "I'm angry and aggressive."

## Communication is More than Words



### ***Keys to Good Telephone Intonation Include***

- Inflection
- Volume Control
- Pacing the Taxpayer

Inflection: Inflection is what happens when you read a book to a child - it is the wave-like movement of highs and lows in your pitch that makes what you are saying higher or lower. It is the way you emphasize aspects of what you are saying to make it interesting.

When you repeat phrases and terms many times in a day, like many customer service representatives do, you tend to become monotone as the phrases have lost their interest to you. In telephone customer service, inflection is pivotal and "monotone" lapses are the enemy. You can improve your inflection by:

- Practicing to stress certain words/phrases
- Regulating your breathing - make each breathe deep and slow
- Exaggerating your tone of voice
- Changing around the phrases you use - repetition equals monotony
- Smiling when on the phone - this causes the facial muscles to contract, creating a more positive tone. Yes, taxpayers can hear you smiling.

Be aware that too much inflection sounds unrealistic and artificial.

Volume: Speaking in a moderate voice is the norm for customer service. High volume scares and intimidates people. Low volumes can be very effective, especially when a taxpayer is irate - a low volume voice under these circumstances serves to calm them.

Speaking louder for short bursts can occasionally serve to emphasize or focus attention, but it should be used rarely.

Pace: Pace is a great tool to build rapport with a taxpayer. Customer service professionals recommend mimicking your taxpayer's (customer's) pace. Speaking too fast will confuse them, while speaking too slowly may leave the impression you are talking down to them.

By controlling the pace of the conversation, you can get the taxpayer to consider, or reconsider, what you are saying, and place emphasis on what you deem important. This also helps to articulate a solution or answer to a taxpayer in a manner he/she understands.

## **Telephone Etiquette**

In the world of customer service, most people hate the telephone. It has become common in the US, when calling a company or service provider, to come in contact with an automated answering service that prompts the caller to choose a series of numbers to attain their desired request. This has made it increasingly difficult to get in touch with a live human being.

Do your best to answer every phone call that comes to your desk. If you are with a taxpayer and the phone rings, you are not expected to answer it - these calls can go to voicemail. However, once you are finished with the taxpayer in the office, be sure to listen to the voicemail and return the call as soon as possible.

## ***Voicemail***

What taxpayers hear when they reach your voicemail is important. Be brief - remember they may be frustrated simply because you are not there. Use a friendly voice and:

- State who you are
- When you will return (if possible)
- When they can expect a return call
- Provide other options - if the need is immediate and someone else can help, give their name and contact information

## ***Good Telephone Etiquette***

Good telephone etiquette is the essence of dealing with people in a polite and efficient manner over the phone. It is one easy and definite way to improve customer service if you follow the guidelines that follow here:

Telephone etiquette, unlike more varying body language, can be uniform and is not culturally based. The phone is often the first or last place a taxpayer comes in contact with the township. Being telephone friendly is one of the least expensive and cost-effective ways to deliver better customer service.

## ***Answering the Telephone***

How you answer the phone can tell the whole story of how we treat our taxpayers and employees. The correct phrase said in the right order in a positive tone leaves a good impression and starts the taxpayer relationship off on the right foot.

1. Pick up the phone by the third ring. More than three rings signals chaos in your office or inattentiveness on the part of our department.
2. Greet the caller using: "hello" or "good morning". Good manners show you respect the caller.
3. Give your name: "Good morning, my name is \_\_\_" or "Hello, this is \_\_\_\_". This courtesy serves to personalize the experience for the taxpayer as well as allowing the taxpayer to hold you accountable for your level of service.

He/she now has a point of reference and someone to contact when he/she calls back.

4. Ask the taxpayer if or how you can help. Asking to help tells the taxpayer you are there to serve his/her needs and to solve his/her problems. This also leaves the taxpayer with a positive impression.

Example: "Good morning, Garfield Township Assessors Office, this is \_\_\_\_.  
How may I help you?"

The greeting is key - it sets the tone and style of the whole interaction.

### ***Troubleshooting***

Some things which may upset a taxpayer are simply unavoidable. Following are some tips on how to best handle these situations:

Putting a Customer on Hold - Ask the taxpayer if you can put them on hold, wait for them to say "yes" or "no" and then explain it will only be for a short period of time.

- Explain why you are putting them on hold.
- Thank them for holding.

Transferring a Call - Ask the taxpayer if they mind being transferred, wait for them to say "yes" or "no" and explain why they are being transferred and to whom.

Taking a Message - Explain your co-worker's absence in a positive light but do not be too specific.

- Explain that your co-worker is in a meeting, conference, briefing or training. Do not say he or she is gravely ill, too hung over to come to work, never called in today, can't be found, is playing golf, you don't know where he or she is or that he or she "was just here".
- Give a reasonable estimate of when the co-worker will return.

- Offer to help the caller, take a message or transfer to another staff member.

If a co-worker is on vacation or away at training and will not return to the office for some time, it is permissible to say that he or she is on vacation or getting educated. However, avoid details such as: "\_\_\_ is at the beach - I bet he/she's living it up." These details may seem innocuous and even humorous, they give the wrong impression to those seeking service.

Ending the Call - This is the final step in good phone etiquette. Always end the call on a positive note. Repeat any actions that you agreed to take and what you are going to do to help or serve the customer.

## **Make a Good First Impression:**

Your success and livelihood depends on how our taxpayers perceive you in the first 30 seconds of your interaction with them. Strive to develop an almost instantaneous rapport with the taxpayers. This will give the taxpayer a reason to like you, be confident that you can help them and listen to what you have to say.

The reality is that all people prefer doing business with those we like and trust. Impressions are the key to developing trust and confidence.

As the old saying goes, "You never get a second chance to make a good first impression." This is why the first impression is so important and can set the tone for all future interactions with our taxpayers.

Here are some ways to **create positive impressions** - some of which have already been covered:

- Thoughtfulness in meeting the taxpayer's needs
- Personal responsibility for a taxpayer
- Quick problem solving for the taxpayer
- Offering immediate assistance
- Friendliness
- Using the taxpayer's name in conversation

- Pleasant voice tone
- Polite and courteous manners
- Neatness
- A genuine smile

Some factors that **create a negative impression** and should **ALWAYS be avoided**:

- Making the taxpayer wait
- Not answering the phone promptly
- Not saying "please" and/or "thank you"
- Speaking loudly or condescendingly to taxpayers or colleagues
- Making faces, frowning, acting distant, not smiling
- Looking disheveled or like you do not care about your appearance
- A poor handshake
- Focusing on another task while addressing or servicing a taxpayer

**Remember:** impressions stay with those you meet, especially taxpayers, and once registered, negative impressions are more difficult to overcome.

### **Ten Major Don'ts of Customer Service:**

Everyday we face situations when what we say makes or breaks a service interaction. Below are **ten phrases that should NEVER be used** because they frustrate and anger taxpayers:

1. No.
2. I don't know.
3. That's not my job./That's not my department.
4. You are right - that is bad.
5. Calm down.
6. I'm busy right now.
7. Call me back.

8. That's not my fault.
9. You need to talk to my supervisor.
10. You want it by when?

### ***Change That "Don't" Into a "Do"***

No - Everyone hates the word "no". It is de-motivating, discouraging and disinteresting. You will hear this word throughout your life as a customer and as a service provider. "No" is tantamount to "bad service." "No" is easy, cheap, unproductive and negative - it means failure. Unfortunately, "no" is the word we most often hear when a new idea, request or concept is introduced. There may be times when you will have to say "no," but focus on what you can do for the taxpayer (accentuate the positive) and not the negatives of the situation. It is better to say, "What I can do is ..." and demonstrate that you care and want to provide quality service despite your current limitations.

I Don't Know - Good service means never saying, "I don't know." When a taxpayer hears "I don't know," they hear "I don't feel like finding the information you need." Better to say, "I'll find out" or "Let me look into this and get back to you ASAP."

- It is also best to be honest - ALWAYS. Do not try to give information about something you really know nothing about. If you don't know, tell the taxpayer you will get the answer for them and get back to them.

That's Not My Job/That's Not My Department - If a taxpayer asks you to do something that you do not know how to do or do not have the authority to do, become a catalyst by leading the taxpayer to the person, or department, who can help him/her solve the problem. Better to say, "Let me transfer you to the person who can immediately help you with this problem."

You're Right - That is Bad - By sympathizing with the taxpayer's plight rather than actually doing something to help solve/answer the taxpayer's problem, you will not win over the taxpayer. If the taxpayer expresses annoyance or

frustration, do not make it worse by commiserating with him/her. Empathize with the taxpayer but seek to solve the problem - or at the very least, direct them to someone who can help.

- It does the township no good to criticize co-workers, former employees or other departments within the township to the taxpayers. All interested parties end up looking unprofessional and inept. Instead, try your best to accommodate the taxpayer. Do not promise anything you cannot deliver but do try to serve them well. Better to say, "I understand your frustration, let's see how we can solve this problem."

Calm Down - When taxpayers are upset or angry, let them vent (within reason) and they will eventually calm down. Telling them to "calm down" is belittling, and often only infuriates them more. Better to say, "I'm sorry." This is one of the ideal phrases for customer service - it helps to placate the angriest taxpayer and allows you to begin the process of solving a taxpayer complaint or request and "meet him/her halfway." Apologizing does not mean you agree with the taxpayer but it is a means to empathize and move beyond the emotion of the moment and any potential negative impact.

I'm Busy Right Now - It is not easy to juggle taxpayers. You are often helping one when another calls or visits. Asking a taxpayer to be patient or politely asking them to wait is very different than putting them off and saying you're too busy to help. Leaving them standing there, or on hold, are two of the mortal sins of customer service. "Being too busy" is basically saying you do not care and they are not important. Let the taxpayer know that they are important and you are aware of their presence. Better to say, "I'll be with you in a moment" or "Please hold and I'll be right with you."

Call Me Back - This expression conveys little interest on your part for the needs and wants of the taxpayer. You should always call the taxpayer back - because, honestly, you work for them and should be responsive to their requests. Being proactive is part of good customer service.

That's Not My Fault - If an angry taxpayer accuses you of creating a problem - whether right or wrong, the natural reaction is to defend yourself. This is NOT the best course of action. The taxpayer has a problem that needs to be

solved. By resisting the need to defend yourself, and instead focusing on the needs of the taxpayer, you can resolve the problem faster and with less stress and confrontation. Better to say, "Let's see what we can do about this problem."

You Need to Talk to My Supervisor - This cliché of bad customer service has angered and frustrated taxpayers for decades. Taxpayers often ask for things outside the scope of your work or authority - maybe even outside the services provided by the township. While passing off these requests to your manager is tempting, it is better if you attempt to solve the problem yourself or go direction to the supervisor yourself and get a solution. You become a hero for the taxpayer and the supervisor. Better to say, "Let me find that out for you."

You Want It by When? - Taxpayers often make unrealistic demands, especially when it comes to time. While your first reaction may be annoyance and you may want to make a snide or sarcastic comment, the best approach is to hold off on displaying a negative attitude and making a poor impression. Better to say, "I will call you right back after I find out if that is feasible."

## **Communicating with the Unsatisfied Taxpayer:**

How many times, as a customer, have you run into the problem of excuses? There is a problem and the salesperson/technician/customer service representative is making lame excuses, such as:

- It is the fault of the computer.
- It is the fault of the other sales clerk.
- It is the fault of the chief of the department.
- It is the fault of the system.
- It is the fault of the Government.
- Or, it is just the way it is - c'est la vie.

Sometimes it feels as if nothing is anyone's responsibility - this is poor customer service. Good customer service means accountability, responsibility and taking action to satisfy the taxpayer.

If you have an unsatisfied taxpayer (for just or unjust reasons), you will have to use some of the many techniques of the customer service professional to win their support and continued loyalty. When coming into contact with a taxpayer, communicating with him/her, or analyzing problems, do not forget to use these methods (or qualities) of the customer service professional:

Listen - It is of primary importance when dealing with an unsatisfied or complaining taxpayer to listen attentively to his/her complaint, gripe, frustration or grievance. Be patient, attentive and friendly.

Express You are Sorry -

"We are sorry for this mistake/problem."

"We are terribly sorry for this inconvenience."

"How can we work to solve this problem together?"

"I can imagine how frustrated you are."

Do Not Argue and Do Not Interrupt - This will only worsen the situation, especially if the taxpayer is angry. Let him/her speak before you try to discuss what has happened.

Do Not Lose Your Self-Control - If you stay relaxed, taxpayers will calm down.

Point Out Facts - Listen carefully and write everything down. Do not make any comments until the taxpayer is finished talking.

Admit the Problem - If you can suggest a solution, do it. If not, tell the taxpayer what actions you will take and what actions will follow. Never make the mistake of promising something you are not able to do.

Involve the Taxpayer in Problem Solving - Suggest to the taxpayer alternative solutions, if they exist. Taxpayers appreciate the opportunity to choose the ways their problem is solved.

Follow Up - Make sure the promised measures are taken. If you do not fulfill what was promised and ignore the taxpayer's complaint, the problem will grow. And, next time it will be more difficult to solve.

Give the Taxpayer a "Way Back" - Sometimes taxpayers are wrong. Let them leave with dignity, without feeling embarrassed.

Do Not Question the Taxpayer's Correctness - From the very beginning, you should believe that the taxpayer may be right. Always be open minded toward the taxpayer's opinion, make them feel they deserve to be heard.

### **Solving the Taxpayer's Problems:**

When you listen to the taxpayer's complaint, you take responsibility to solve the problem. Things you can do to get the problem solved are:

- Listen without interruption and with full attention.
- Behave without aggression, and without arguing.
- Do not extend excuses for the problem, and thank the taxpayer for drawing your attention to it and for helping to solve it.
- Express sympathy and full understanding.
- Ask necessary questions to get more complete information and a complete picture of the situation.
- Find out exactly what the taxpayer needs you to do for them.
- Explain first what you can do, and then gently add what you cannot do.
- Discuss in detail all opinions, and then decide what needs to be done.
- Undertake immediately what was discussed.
- Check the result to make sure the taxpayer is satisfied.

### ***Follow Up with the Taxpayer***

It is extremely important to make sure that all customer service measures that were discussed or promised are in fact taken. It is not enough for the taxpayer to experience a satisfactory phone or face-to-face interaction. If nothing comes of

the contact, they will be even more frustrated and unhappy. Make sure you do whatever you promised in a timely manner.

**Initiative** - Initiative is the difference between adequate customer service and winning customer service. Some everyday examples of exceptional customer service are:

- The taxi driver who opens the door for you, or at night, waits for you to safely get into your destination.
- The computer technician who does computer work and calls back a week later to make sure your IT is functioning well.
- The car salesperson that calls a month after you buy a car to make sure it is running well.
- The electric company who calls and checks to make sure your service is working well and apologizes for any "brownouts" or "blackouts."

None of these people HAD to make this extra effort or go to this trouble. These "goodwill initiatives" are beyond the call of duty and make the taxpayer beyond satisfied. They make the taxpayer remember the transaction or occasion.

**Traits to Emulate** - "Extra effort" wins the day for customer service. Specific traits to emulate include:

- Be on time, open on time, deliver on time.
- Follow through and deliver your promises
- Go the extra kilometer for taxpayers
- Offer taxpayers options
- Express empathy to upset taxpayers
- Treat taxpayers as the MOST important part of your job
- Treat co-workers as if they are taxpayers
- Given taxpayers your name and contact information

## Customer Service Starts at the Top

Managers rarely understand how their actions, tone and attitude affect the performance and success of their staff. As a manager, the first step to motivating staff is to demonstrate the customer service qualities you want them to emulate.

Here are a number of factors to take into account as you seek to mold your team into a successful customer service unit:

1. Greet your staff in the morning. Start the day with a positive attitude.
2. Discuss your feelings. Do not ever vent or rage in front of your employees - always remain calm. If you have a problem with one employee, discuss it in private. Explain in detail why you are frustrated with their behavior, and allow the employee to speak openly and express their opinions. Try to come to a mutual solution with the employee.
3. Do the right thing. When faced with a difficult taxpayer, follow correct customer service practices. In other words, practice what you preach.
4. Support your staff's decisions. As a manager, taxpayers often ask to speak to you when upset, thinking you will overturn your employee's decisions. While sometimes you will correct an employee's mistake, often the employee was correct in their reasoning. It is important to build morale by sticking up for your employees. Collaborate with your staff, empower them to be flexible and act resourcefully.
5. Be willing to learn from others. Managers do not have all of the customer service answers; there is nothing worse than a "know-it-all" manager. There are opportunities for learning everyday if you are paying attention.
6. Learn to listen to what the taxpayers need. A good manager, in order to reinforce this practice, should listen to employees and take their ideas, opinions and input into account.
7. Take time to socialize. Try to know your staff, their personal lives and what is important to them. Take the time to celebrate achievements and

noteworthy occasions. People are individuals and a positive work environment makes for better performance and a more content staff.

8. Use good phone etiquette. Be your staff's best example of good phone manners by following the guidelines herein.
9. Say "thank you." Be generous with compliments and praise your staff for their efforts. Thank them for a job well done and foster an environment of recognition. People enjoy praise and strive for recognition - give them something to work for!

Technical competence is not as important as people skills and attitude when it comes to customer service. The technical skills can be learned later but the motivation, attitude and desire to provide good service is much harder to find.

Remember to be successful in customer service, Garfield Township wants people who enjoy treating people as individuals and who are prepared to accept responsibility for delivering what the taxpayer wants.